

Eagle Incident Provides Teachable Moment for Kodiak Youth

By

Gary Wheeler, Refuge Manager, Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge

What began as a grim story of injury and death on a cold January afternoon ended with a celebration of life and freedom on a sunny February morning, as hundreds of Kodiak elementary students cheered the recovery and release of 19 bald eagles that had been injured in an accident at a local cannery.

The story began on January 11, when an uncovered dump truck filled with slimy fish waste was parked outside of the fish processing plant and left unattended. Within minutes at least 50 bald eagles had plunged into the dump truck looking for an easy meal. In the frenzy that followed, the birds became covered in thick fish slime, which rendered them flightless. Twenty eagles died from drowning in the waste or from injuries sustained in the incident, and the thirty surviving birds had to be transported to Anchorage's Bird Treatment and Learning Center (TLC) rehabilitation facility.

After a month of care provided by veterinary staff and dozens of dedicated volunteers, the story came full circle when the rehabilitated birds were released into the wild back in Kodiak.

"We'd had a lot of local press coverage," said Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge Manager Gary Wheeler, "so I thought the community deserved the opportunity to see their birds returned to the wild. Everyone enjoys an animal story with a happy ending, and my staff thought the eagle release would present a great teachable moment for the children of Kodiak." When, refuge environmental education coordinator Sue Knoth received an overwhelmingly positive response from local elementary school principals, the stage was set. In advance of the release, Knoth pointed school officials toward newspaper accounts, photos, and the Bird TLC blog describing the birds' care and treatment.

Tuesday, February 12th dawned clear and bright in Kodiak, and children in brightly colored outerwear were already filing onto the playground as the refuge pickup pulled up to Peterson Elementary School. Whispers of anticipation buzzed through the crowd as 5 pet kennels were set out in front. As Principal Karen Winkler quieted the students, Greg McDonald, a bird handler from the Bird Treatment and Learning Center, removed one of the birds from the kennels for the children to admire. Refuge Manager Wheeler spoke to the children about the eagle incident and the treatment that the birds had received, sprinkling a few eagle life history facts into the mix.

Then it was time for the main event - the eagle release. Hans Neidig, Special Assistant to the Secretary of Interior for Alaska, launched the first bird into the clear morning air. Cheers and applause rose from the children, but, after a few robust wing beats, the adult male bird settled gently onto the snowy playground. A hush fell over the crowd, and one could almost feel the questions being asked by 300 young minds. Is he hurt? Will he fly again? After a few seconds, though, the bird collected its bearings, took a couple of quick steps, and rose from the ground, winging its way toward the horizon. Another cheer!

Principal Winkler released the remaining eagles from their kennels one by one, and each time the children reacted with cheers and applause. After the last bird had disappeared from sight, the students, teachers, and visiting parents expressed their thanks to the refuge staffers. Principal Winkler, almost breathless, expressed how touched she was being able to release these magnificent birds back into the wild.

Kodiak Refuge personnel visited two other schools that day, releasing an additional 14 birds. Reactions from students and teachers were identical - excitement, cheers, and grins of sheer joy. There was no rowdiness, no misbehavior, just hundreds of children and adults enraptured by the moment - clearly experiencing the "sense of wonder" written about by famed naturalist Rachael Carson years ago.

The day before the release, refuge manager Wheeler had been asked by a local reporter whether he thought that all the time and resources devoted to caring for and treating the birds was justified. After seeing the rapture on 900 young Kodiak faces at the eagle release events, Wheeler doesn't hesitate a moment in concluding that all of the effort was more than worthwhile.